

## TODAY'S STUDENTS: RATIONAL CONSUMERS OF UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING

Carl Zulauf

McCormick Professor of Agricultural Marketing and Policy, Ohio State University  
July 1997

### STUDENTS AS CUSTOMERS: THEY'VE CHANGED

- They are committed and care deeply about what excites them.
- Current students see a college degree as necessary to attain "The American Dream."
- But, they do not inherently value education.
- They see their college years as composed of a set of experiences, with formal classroom education being only one element in the set.
- They have been making major decisions since well before college, and do not automatically assume that adults know what is "best" for them.
- They are suffering information and choice-making overload.
- They are concerned about the future and fear failure.
- Their discount rate for the future is very high.

### STUDENTS AS PRACTICING ECONOMISTS

- ➔ Students use cost-benefit analysis in deciding how to allocate their scarce resource, time.
- ➔ A key input in their cost-benefit analysis is the course's grading schedule. They intensely evaluate the type of assignments and grading criteria in the syllabus. They quickly adjust their understanding to reflect information revealed by (1) the teacher's discussion of grading philosophy (if any) and (2) the teacher's performance when grading. In other words, there is an active market on grading information and it is efficient.
- ➔ Another key input is the reputation and philosophy of the teacher and the course. Most undergraduate students, though not all, want to be challenged, but in a manner consistent with being an adult. They willingly accept that the instructor is choosing the correct subject matter for the course (this can be overrode by actions), but they want to know what philosophy the instructor brings to the course. Students understand that teachers differ in approach and temperament, and that sometimes they will not be able to adjust to the teacher's philosophy.
- ➔ Given student's high discount rate, they want the material relevant to their current life. Changes in societal attitudes have probably reinforced this long-time characteristic of students. If you believe a long-term payoff exists for what you are doing in the course, then you must become a salesperson for that payoff.

## LEARNING - CENTERED TEACHING

### BACKGROUND

- Learning-centered teaching is NOT a set of pedagogical tools. Most significantly, it does not discard the lecture as an important teaching tool.
- Learning-centered teaching rests upon three attributes: ① emphasis on the retention and use of information, ② meaningful incorporation of the scientific method into the teaching tool kit, and ③

recognition that learning and teaching are intricately interwoven.

- In contrast, most teaching today is information-centered. It emphasizes the disbursement of mass quantities of information, and embraces a corollary idea that the teacher is, if not all-knowing, at least close to it.
- Some proponents of learning-centered teaching argue that the instructor should serve only as a facilitator, effectively leaving students in charge. My experiences suggest students feel cheated when the instructor does not remain in charge. Their perspective: "You better know something I don't, otherwise I'm wasting my money." However, learning-centered teaching does require the instructor to behave more like "The guide on the side, instead of the sage on the stage."
- Learning-centered teaching is more consistent with the attributes of today's students than is information-centered teaching. It increases their input into the course and involves them in active learning (i.e., treats them like an adult participant in an adult activity). Furthermore, it better matches an overarching attribute of modern social existence: the enormous rate of information change. Functionality depends less on mastering a body of knowledge, than on mastering the skills of learning, i.e., the skills of reinventing knowledge.

#### **MY IMPLEMENTATION OF LEARNING -CENTERED TEACHING**

- ◆ The core activity in learning is thinking. Thinking revolves around the delineation of the question, not the divination of an answer. Often, when a question is phrased appropriately, the answer is obvious. No pedagogical tool is as closely tied to the process of thinking as Socratic instruction. It is a feedback process, starting with an instructor or student question, followed by the ensuing search for an appropriate answer, and beginning anew with the inevitable emergence of related questions.
- ◆ In Socratic instruction, students are co-teachers. They can fill this role only if they attend class. Attendance is taken daily, and becomes part of the participation grade (see attached syllabus). Class size constrains the ability to efficiently take attendance, but I have not had problems with classes up to 60 in number. The taking of attendance has an additional benefit of contributing to a more personal atmosphere in the classroom.
- ◆ When students are co-teachers, it is important to monitor their assessment of the class. Hence, two or three short assessments are conducted during the quarter. Because assessment is integral to the learning paradigm, students are given credit for completing them (see attached syllabus).
- ◆ Because learning and teaching are intricately interwoven, it is undesirable to treat exams only as testing metrics. Examinations are part of the learning experience. Each exam contains some questions which require the use of material discussed in class to analyze situations which have not been discussed in class.
- ◆ Socratic instruction is not appropriate at times. Most importantly, it must be used sparingly when introducing key concepts that are building blocks and during the first 2-3 weeks of an introductory course (it is too much of a shock for many students in this setting).
- ◆ The development of learning skills reduces the time available for content. Hence, less material is covered. However, development of learning skills increases retention of the material covered and provides a foundation for more rapid acquisition of knowledge in subsequent classes.
- ◆ Current textbooks are written, first, for instructors and, second, for the mass distribution of information. From the perspective of student-centered learning, they are too long, and do not help students develop learning skills. For example, blank spaces in textbooks are unheard of, even though writing is an intimate act of thinking. We also need to reinvent the art of textbook writing so that it emphasizes the scholarship of integration.

## *EMPLOYER RATED QUALITIES*

[Census Bureau Survey of 3,000 employers; scale is 1 to 5, with 5 being the most important.]

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Rank</u>
Attitude	4.6
Communication Skills	4.2
Previous Work Experience	4.0
Recommendations from Current Employer	3.4
Recommendations from Previous Employer	3.4
Industry-based Credentials Certifying Skills	3.2
Years of Schooling Completed	2.9
Score on Test Administered during Interview	2.5
Academic Performance (grades)	2.5
Experience (Reputation) of Applicant's School	2.4
Teacher Recommendations	2.1

As reported in the *New York Times*

# *DISPLACED WORKERS*

[Census Data Analyzed by Paul Atteweil,  
City University of New York]

From 1991 - 1993, 13 million U.S. Workers  
lost their job because their business closed,  
moved, or downsized.

## Job Status of the 13 Million in 1994

27% employed, income  $\geq$  old job

10% employed, income 75 - 100% of old job

8% employed, income 50 - 100% of old job

18% employed, income  $<$  50% of old job

36% unemployed

As reported in the *Akron Beacon Journal*

# *EDUCATION WAGE GAP*

[U.S. Department of Labor]

Gender by Year		Real Annual Earnings of Full-Time Worker in 1994 \$
Male High School Graduates		
1979		\$36,594
1994		\$31,081
Male College Graduates		
1979		\$54,391
1994		\$61,008
Female High School Graduates		
1979		\$20,949
1994		\$21,383
Female College Graduates		
1979		\$30,161
1994		\$39,271

As reported in *USA Today*

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF AWARD-WINNING TEACHERS**

- They understand their strengths and weaknesses.
- They seek to understand their students as people and customers.
- They set high standards for their students and corresponding high standards for themselves in assisting their students to reach and/or exceed the established standards.
- They are committed to intensive evaluation, both formal and informal, both student and peer.
- ▲ Their ultimate goal is something beyond the transmission of knowledge.

### **TEACHING TO STUDENTS WHO HAVE THESE ATTRIBUTES**

- ▣ Today's students willingly accept that you are choosing the correct subject matter content for the course (this can be overrode later). However, non-subject matter aspects of the course, such as grading philosophy and types of assignments, need to be explained early on in the course in such a way that they will accept your non-subject matter objectives as reasonable.
- ▣ The grading scale must send signals consistent with your objectives for the class, both in terms of what is important and how important it is.
- ▣ The instructor's commitment to the grading process needs to be explicit and consistent with the grading schedule.
- ▣ The first midterm is the most important event in the course.
- ▣ If you believe a long-term payoff exists for what you are doing in the course, then you must become a salesperson for that payoff.
- ▣ We are teaching too much material in our courses. We need to decide what is a must to know, make sure they learn it, and teach it in such a way that it relates to their lives.